

FINDING A NICHE: EXAMINING SOPHOMORE AND JUNIOR SENSE OF COMMUNITY

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By

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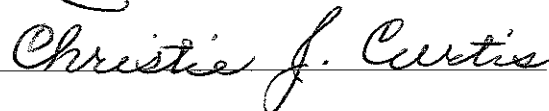
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A Thesis

Presented to
the Department of Education
School of Arts and Sciences
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Master of Arts in Education

By
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, colleges and universities have made improvements in assisting students to transition to the university community during their first year on campus, but often times this support fades away once students move into their sophomore and junior years.

Theories such as McMillan and Chavis (1986) Sense of Community show that students need a place to belong somewhere in university community. In addition, areas where sophomores struggle to connect in the university community will be addressed. The study designed for this thesis focused on survey responses and one-on-one interview responses to identify where sophomores and juniors connect to the university and if the support provided by the administration is relevant to the student experiences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
List of Figures	3
CHAPTER	
1. SOMEWHERE TO BELONG	4
A Brief Examination of the American University.....	5
The Study's Purpose.....	6
Christian Connection.....	6
Research Questions.....	7
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Sense of Community and Practice.....	8
Theory of Retention.....	12
Discussion on the Sophomore Slump.....	14
Administrative Influence.....	16
3. METHODOLOGY	18
The Study Design.....	18
Site of Study and Population	21
Study Implementation	22
Validity, Reliability, and Coding.....	24

4. DATA DISCUSSION	26
Initial Survey Results	26
Themes From Interviews.....	31
Living Situations	31
On Campus Housing vs. Commuter Community	35
Friendship.....	38
Campus Events	40
Academics.....	42
Responsibility.....	43
5. A FINAL EVALUATION	45
Research Questions	47
Public Policy.....	53
Limitations	53
Recommendations for Further Study	54
REFERENCES	55
APPENDIX.....	58

LIST OF FIGURES

	PAGE
1. Graph for Statement One	26
2. Graph for Statement Two	27
3. Graph for Statement Three	27
4. Graph for Statement Four	28
5. Graph for Statement Five.....	28
6. Graph for Statement Six	29
7. Graph for Statement Seven	29
8. Graph for Statement Eight	30

Chapter 1: Somewhere to Belong

For many adults, the college years were a significant part of their development. It was a time when the adult began to move away from their families, considered their long-term career goals, and made lifelong friendships. When the traditional student arrived on campus, they were assigned an orientation group to assist in the transition to the university community. Many students were required to live on campus their first year and were connected through interactions with their Resident Assistant (RAs) and Resident Director, as well as their fellow students who attended the same general education classes. In these environments, students were able to build relationships with their roommates and others in their residence halls and in the classroom. As the student transitioned from their freshmen to their sophomore and junior years, they took steps away from needing the same support as when they first arrived on the university campus. However, though the student's needs have changed, they still need to feel supported. As Ernest Boyer (1990) noted in his landmark study, while many students value the pursuit of independence, they still want to feel as though they belong to the university community. While Boyer's study did not solely focus specifically on sophomores and juniors, he did record many students felt "like a number in a book" (p. 47-8). He quoted one student: "We don't want the university to be involved in our lives, but we would like someone to be concerned occasionally about our lives" (p. 47). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how well students in their middle years of the university community connect, and where additional support could be provided by the administration to best support students.

A Brief Examination of the American University

The American University has changed dramatically since its formation in the mid 1600s. In the early years, students were male and were mostly from the same socio-economic class, if

not from the same region of the country. These institutions of higher learning were small, and often every professor, not to mention the president of the college, knew each student on campus by name. Boyer (1990) reported that even as late as 1870, the representative American university had about ten faculty members and a student population of fewer than one hundred (p. 4). In fact, students and faculty often lived in the same housing structures and dined together. Thus, it was easy for students to feel comfortable in the university setting. However, after the beginning of the twentieth century, the university changed. As the country diversified, women and students of diverse ethnic backgrounds were admitted to the university community. Universities became a place of learning for all economic backgrounds, not just for the upper class. Finally the role of the professor changed from where the professor was only in charge of instruction to where he or she were also focused on research in their fields (Boyer).

In this new environment, students were introduced to cultures and ideas that were brand new to them. Additionally, students who entered the university directly after high school graduation moved from an environment where they were influenced and known by their high school teachers and staff to an environment where they often initially had very little interaction with their professors and the university administration (Boyd, 1990).

Not only has the landscape of the university setting changed, but also the average student. In the past, the traditional student had been a full-time student whose sole purpose was to attend classes. Now, there is a greater diversity among students: Universities have seen an increase in students who attend classes part time, are working more, or delay going to college for a few years after graduating high school (Tinto, 2012). While there are still many students who attend the university immediately after high school and attend class full time, the population has shifted, and the university must shift accordingly to remain relevant to students.

The Study's Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore where students felt connected to the university community during their sophomore and junior years, and to identify where the university administration could improve support to assist students as they grew into adulthood. In the last twenty years or so, educational research has become more focused on student's needs at the university level, though much of that focus has been on the university population as a whole. This study was unique in that it looked specifically at the population of students during their middle years, or sophomore and junior years, in the university. Another unique feature of this study was that it was a qualitative study. Many of the studies on the topic of student connection at the university have been quantitative and their conclusions were developed with data from surveys. In contrast, the data for this project was provided through one-on-one interviews between the student and the researcher which allowed the researcher to identify themes of student connection.

Christian Connection

One of the goals of the higher education process is to assist students to be independent, critical thinkers. In Christianity, knowledge is a component of one of the two commands Jesus gave his followers: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your *mind*" (Matthew 23:27, NLT). This commandment bridges the notion that both the mind and the heart are important to the development of faith.

One of the distinctions of attending a Christian university is that schools use curriculum and relationships to help students grow spiritually as well as academically. As the Proverbs say, "as iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend" (27:17, NLT). The relationships formed through the university experience can be transformative. Students build and develop these

relationships through membership with the university community: In their major, through housing, and through the interactions they have with the faculty and staff on campus.

Research Questions

The foundation on which this research study was developed were the following three questions:

- What are the areas that sophomores and juniors feel connected to their college community?
- After their first year in community did students notice a change to their connection to the university community?
- Do students feel the support being offered from the university's administration is relevant to their life experiences?

The research questions were designed to identify where students connected to the university in their sophomore and junior years so that the relevancy of the experience could be discussed. The design in of the study will be examined in detail in chapter three. However, before the study can be examined it is important to analyze previous research that focused on the university experience. In particular, chapter two will examine The Sense of Community Theory, and will focus on student retention, the specific needs of sophomore students, and administration.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Although student connection to the university is a newer topic of educational research and limited number of studies are available, there are two theories that should be discussed in depth, as well as other literature that focus on the needs of student in the sophomore year.

Sense of Community Theory and Practice

The first theory to be discussed is the Sense of Community Theory developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). The theory states that one's sense of community, or what an individual needs from community, is comprised of four components: Membership, influence, the integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection.

The first component, membership, was when group members believed they had a right to belong to the group; there was also a sense that once the member believed they had a place in the group, the member's personal investment and connectedness to the group increased. Boundaries were a necessary division of membership as they provided a structure and a sense of safety to encouraged intimacy between members. Boundaries could include physical space, such as living in a specific area, but could be extended to a common dress code, use of certain language or slang, or the ability to understand and use a common set of symbols.

The second component, influence, was when the group member conformed to the group dynamic. When members had influence they had a voice in the decision making process, yet the member was also molded to become more like the group. The third component of the theory stated that when group members experienced membership and believed they were able to influence the group, they were reinforced to remain with the group. Group membership helped fill the member's needs to be accepted, connected, and experience a sense of belonging. Additionally, group members tended to share similar values, which were also reinforced by group membership.

Finally, McMillan and Chavis (1986) theorized that sense of community was impacted by one's shared emotional connection to the group. As members created and maintained bonds, their sense to the community was strengthened by the time spent with one another, as well as the

participation of events with one another. As members spent more time together, and felt more comfortable with one another, their sense of emotional connection to each other and the group also increased. One result of an increased emotional connection was that the group developed a spiritual bond, which may (or may not) be founded on a common belief system (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

In the context of the university setting, an example of McMillan and Chavis (1986) Sense of Community Theory could be found in sorority membership. Girls experienced membership as they lived in the same dwelling, and attended the same sorority meetings and events. Girls influenced each other through bonding sessions; and often advised each other on who to date, which brands to wear, and which fraternities to accept as a brother floor. To become a member of the sorority, one had to share common values, which often included sisterhood, commitment, and dating. Membership in the sorority allowed girls to have a place to belong and establish friendships, which helped meet the needs of the student. Finally, membership in a sorority created a shared emotional connection, which allowed girls to build friendships with others who lived in the house and by the establishment of a common bond of membership in the sorority (Robbins, 2004).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) formed The Sense of Community Index, a survey designed to be taken by the individual to gauge how connected the member felt to the community, as well as how membership in the community met the needs of individual group members. A high score on the Sense of Community Index indicated high satisfaction with the community, and a low score on the Sense of Community Index indicated the opposite. Using the principles of McMillan and Chavis' work researchers have been studying how the theory of sense of

community applies to the university setting, and how to identify when students feel connected to the university and when they do not.

Pretty (1990) was one of the first to connect McMillan and Chavis's (1986) work to the university community and used the Sense of Community Index developed by McMillan and Chavis along with the Residence Environment Scale to survey student's sense of community within the campus. The study noted that the sense of community can be "partially predicted from the amount of involvement, academic achievement, and support" students perceived (p. 62). It was also noted that students felt they were part of a community when they knew what behavior was expected from the group.

Additionally Lonsbury and DeNui (1996) determined in a quantitative study that students were more likely to report a high sense of community within their school if they attended a smaller university or college, as smaller schools offered students more opportunities to be involved on campus. Lonsbury and DeNui also established students with an extraverted personality were also more likely to report a high sense of community as they were more likely to be attracted to clubs and organizations on campus.

Another notable study, that used the sense of community index to identify if one's connection to the community would affect retention rates was produced by Jacobs and Archer (2008). The quantitative study surveyed 4,000 first year students at universities in the western United States. They noted that students who established a sense of community, such as membership in clubs or fraternities and sororities impacted students sense of community. They noted: "Students who find a niche and a place to belong are more likely to return" (p. 284).

Furthermore, researchers surveyed students to gauge how one's sense of community change when the community is under a threat. For the study, researchers surveyed students who

attended a historically African American university located in a city where the mayor wanted to move the urban-based campus to a more rural area. Because most of the students in the university lived off campus and retained employment offered by the business located in the urban area, students and administrators of the university believed enrollment would decrease if the university was required to move. Because of this proposal, students protested, and the researchers noted that the sense of community and connection to the university was greater when the students felt the campus was threatened than when the community seemed safe from change (Loomis, Dockett, Brodsky, 2004).

Finally, the sense of community index has been extended to the Christian University to see how the index applies to the Christian campus. In 2005, researchers Bomus, Woods, and Chan completed a quantitative study of Christian colleges associated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) to see if students who were more devoted to their faith had a greater sense of community. Eleven of the twenty-one invited schools participated, and the study featured responses of 596 undergrad students in eight states. The data revealed that students stated that they felt a higher connection of community when they were more engaged in their faith, lived on campus, were involved in activities, and were in their first year of school (Bomus, Woods, Chan, 2005). This study was also an important discussion for the design of this thesis study because the conclusion was faith played a role in a student's sense of community.

Theory of Retention

The previous section examined students who experienced a high sense of community had a positive experience at their university. Student retention is an important issue as students provide the necessary funding for programs to exist. In his classic work, *Leaving College*, Tinto

(2012) developed a framework attempting to explain a student's decision to leave a university. Tinto argued that the decision to leave a university came from a long process- it was not usually an impulse decision. In short, Tinto suggested in his model the student's decision to depart was influenced by the way the student was intellectually and socially integrated into the university setting. Positive experiences within the university experience encouraged the student to complete their education, and negative experiences weakened his or her intention to stay.

The model viewed the university institution, which was comprised both of social and academic communities, with its own set of values and expectations as an influential piece of the departure decision. The student must be able to balance his or her new commitments to the university with old commitments made to family and friends. The balance between the two communities could impact the student's personal goals as well as how they attempted to reach such goals. The Tinto model suggested students were influenced through the relationships they formed with fellow students, university staff members, and faculty. If the student was able to form supportive and integrated relationships, especially with faculty members, the student was much more likely to feel supported and believe he or she could complete the university program. Membership to some section of the university community was vital for student retention.

Tinto (2012) noted that each student came to the university setting from various family and community backgrounds as well as differing financial situations, skills, temperaments, and educational backgrounds which could affect the student's decision to stay or leave the university setting. For example, if a student did not learn the skills in high school required to be successful in college, and faced a lot of remedial courses, the student may decide the university is too difficult and leave. Likewise, if academic coursework was not challenging enough, the student may choose to leave the university in search of a challenge. Moreover the support the student

received from previous communities could discourage the student's work at the university or could be what kept the student on target. Tinto explained: "When external communities are strong, as they are for commuting students, their actions may serve to condition, if not counter, events within the college" (p. 116). For example, if a student performed poorly on a paper in a class, the external community could encourage the student to stay with the class and look for assistance on how to write the paper better.

Tinto's (2012) theory of retention was important because it provided a long-term view on why a student would decide to leave a university. As illustrated above, there are many factors that can impact whether a student remains at a university, and a departure decision can be made even if a student has had a positive experience with the university.

Using Tinto's (2012) theory of retention to investigate the relationship between spiritual growth and retention, Morris and Beck (2004) surveyed students who attended Christian schools for a period of one year. Students who participated were placed in two groups- those who opted to return to the university the next year, and those who did not. Of those who returned, a majority stated their spiritual growth impacted their decision to return to the university.

Discussion on the Sophomore Slump

This next section of the literature review focused on research that specifically addressed the needs of students in their middle years at the university. While there is a gap in the literature, especially on literature focused on the junior year, some literature is available on the needs of students in their sophomore years. The next part of the literature review will focus on current research on sophomore development.

In a monograph devoted to the discussion on the sophomore experience within the university environment, editors Pattengale and Schreiner (2000), declared that the term

“sophomore slump” was a real problem on the university campus. They noted attrition rates were more likely to increase during or right after the sophomore than other years. One theory on why attrition rates increased during this timeframe was that students began their college years with the expectation that the college experience will be better than it really is. For example, many students come to the university environment with the belief that they will instantly bond with their roommate, succeed in all their classes, and meet their career goals. However, sometimes roommates fight and students fail important classes.

Similarly, in the same monograph, authors Boivin, Fountain, and Bayard (2000) reported students could become disillusioned and cynical in their sophomore year, especially as they become more aware of their weaknesses. During the sophomore year students may face the realization that they may not be suited for the major or career they entered college with the intention of pursuing. Students often came to this realization when they did not successfully complete a required pre-requisite class. Pattengale and Schreiner (2000) suggested that when students came to these realizations, they were usually less supported than their first year, and may also be facing a process where the university was “weeding out” students (p. vi) as the university increase performance standards.

One study that focused on sophomore satisfaction within the university environment, researcher Juillerat (2000) surveyed 118,706 traditional students at both public and private institutions. The study began with a survey that was issued to the entire university, and then the data from sophomore students were paid specific attention to. Of the sample pool, 20.1% of students were sophomores. Juillerat (2000) discovered students who attended public universities valued different programs than students who attended private universities. Students who attended private universities valued a safe community, opportunities for self-expression, and a

community that encouraged school pride; whereas students who attended public universities placed a higher value on the services the school offered. Both groups of students reported they valued a climate where academic excellence was expected, faculty members who were interested in relating to students, and that they were offered enough financial aid to attend the school.

One other study that focused on the sophomore year examined which components of university life had the most impact on student's grade point average. The researchers noted that students who had a strong sense of their professional goals and believed their major was the right for them, tended to have a higher GPA in their sophomore year. Students who struggled to find direction in their professional goals had a lower GPA. They also noted that an increased involvement in student activities did not necessarily correlate to a higher GPA. It was theorized that at this point in their university careers, students tended to identify with activities that appealed to their personalities, and focused their involvement with these activities. A final note from this study was that the students surveyed reported the year they felt most disconnected to the university was their sophomore year. Students reported they received support their freshmen year when they entered the university and then again in their junior and senior years when they began the transition process out of the university, but did not believe they were supported in their sophomore year (Graunke & Woosley, 2005).

Administrative Influence

The final study that will be discussed in this chapter noted the importance the university administration had on student success. Schreiner (2010) began an investigation on how universities could encourage students to thrive in their communities. She and her doctoral students distributed a 35-item survey to 15,000 students across 70 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. In the results, students stated universities could encourage students to

feel more connected to the university by encouraging positive relationships between student groups, between students and faculty, and by providing opportunities for students to offer a voice when the administration had to make a decision. Additionally, students reported it was beneficial to have faculty that engaged students in the learning process, instead of allowing for passive involvement. The results from Schreiner's study revealed that the administration could play a key role in student's engagement in their academic environment and acceptance into the university community.

The literature featured in chapter two provided a foundation for the thesis study that was completed for this paper. From the literature presented above, it is clear students need to feel they have a place to belong in the university community. The Lonusbury and DeNui (1996) study reported students at a smaller school had a strong sense of community. Tinto's (2012) work on retention, concluded when students feel connected to the university they are more likely to re-enroll at that university the following year. The literature also established that sophomores might struggle when they face challenges of trying to determine how to use their gifts in their forthcoming career, and that the university administration could impact student satisfaction by encouraging faculty and staff to support students. The literature also discussed how students who attended a private school valued opportunities for self-expression. These factors are important as the study that was designed for this thesis was conducted at a smaller private school. The next chapter will discuss the study in detail.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter one discussed how the university experience changes after a student's first year on campus. In chapter two, educational research was examined to define the concept of sense of

community, how the student's view of their place in the university impacts retention, and areas where, especially sophomores, struggle in connecting to community. With the foundation of the information provided in chapter one and two, a qualitative study was established to identify where sophomores and juniors connected to the university community, what areas their connection to the community changed after their first year, and how relevant the support offered to students by the university administration was to the student experience. Chapter three will contain detailed information on how the study was initially designed, where the study was conducted, and finally how the study was implemented.

The Study Design

This qualitative study was designed to provide an in-depth look at student's recollections on their experiences in community. Due to the timeframe allowed for the study, the researcher was only able to sit down with a small number of students. Therefore, an initial survey was developed to create a framework of student experience at the university where the study was completed, so that more student responses could be included in the data. Requirements for student participation were students who were over the age of 21 and who had attended the university for a minimum of one year. Student selection will be discussed further on in this chapter.

The initial survey included a total of eight statements. Seven of the eight statements were based on a Likert scale and were determined using a range from one to five; a score of one indicated students strongly disagreed with the statement, and a score of five demonstrated a student strongly agreed with the statement. The statements were the following:

1. [The university] offers me many opportunities to connect to the university community.

2. There are more opportunities for me to connect with [The university]'s community now than in my first year.
3. I have found a place in [the university]'s community where I can be myself.
4. When I have a problem, there are people within the [the university] community that I can go for guidance and support.
5. My sense of community has changed since my first year at [the university].
6. My interactions with community have challenged me to grow both academically and spiritually.
7. I feel most connected to [the university]'s community through: (circle best response)
Dorm Life, Friends, Major, Missions, Clubs/Activities, Other:_____.
8. Overall, I would rate [the university]'s community as excellent.

Student response form the survey provided insight on how well the student was able to connect to community as well as provide framework for the research questions. Statement seven, which requested students pinpoint the area they felt most connected to the university community, addressed the first research question. Framework for the second research question was provided through statement seven, which asked students if their connection to the community had changed since their first year. Finally, the survey questioned if the community was relevant to student's experience through the following: students were able to be themselves on campus (statement three), the student knew of at least one person within the community to go to when they encountered a problem (statement four), and the student believed their interaction in the community encouraged both academic and spiritual growth (statement six). In addition, the survey featured a small demographic informational section (containing information such as

age, major, ethnic background, gender, housing situation, etc) and a place where students could note they were able to volunteer for an one-on-one interview.

The second element of the study was comprised of the one-on-one interviews between the researcher and student, which developed an in-depth understanding of the student experience at the university. Candidates were selected for the interviews from the population of students that were surveyed. Interviews were conducted on campus, during a pre-arranged time, for a period of approximately twenty minutes (some interviews were as short as ten minutes and some interviews were as long as twenty-five) and were between only the researcher and student. All interviews were recorded. The interview questions allowed students to share personal anecdotes that they were unable to share during the survey portion of the study. Additionally, the interview questions allowed the student to share where they experienced the most change in their connection to the university and how relevant the opportunities provided by the university institution and administration were to the student. The interview questions were the following:

- Tell me a little about yourself. (Where are you from, do you live on/off-campus, what is your major, professional goals).
- Talk about your first year in being in community. Where did you feel connected to community and where did you struggle to find connection?
- Currently, where do you connect to [the university]'s community?
- How has your connection to the community changed since your freshman or first year?
- Overall, how well does [the university] as a community meet your needs as a student? Explain.
- How can the community improve to better meet the needs of students?

Furthermore, to triangulate the study, and to gain the perspective of the university administration, the researcher interviewed select members of the Student Development Team. Team members were selected because they operated the infrastructure of student support, student housing, and on-campus events/programming. As each member of the Student Development team worked with a variety of the student population on a daily basis, their perspective was a helpful addition to this study.

Site of study and population. The study was conducted at a mid-sized Christian university located in Southern California. The university was founded in the early 1900s and has become a center for Christian Thought in the Western United States. This mid-sized university can be used as a sample for other Christian universities of the same approximate size and demographic composition in the Western United States. According to 2011 enrollment figures, the total university enrollment was 6,250 students, with 4,271 being traditional undergraduate students. The school is comprised of 59% Caucasian students, 16% Hispanic/Latino students, 13% Asians, 2% African American students, and 8% of students who noted more than one ethnic background (<http://undergrad.biola.edu/about/>).

Surveys were distributed during a class session because the researcher had direct access to students. It was important to be able to interact with students from multiple backgrounds, so the researcher looked for a class where both transfer and non-transfer students were required to take. The ideal class was attended by students in their middle years and would feature students of all majors. At this particular university, students were required to complete 30 units of Bible, which was partially addressed through the Theology I and Theology II classes. Before they were allowed to enroll in these classes, students were required to complete several prerequisite classes from their freshmen or first year after they entered the school as a transfer student. Furthermore,

these classes could be enrolled in any order, so sections of both the Theology I and II classes became ideal places to distribute the survey.

The researcher contacted professors who taught sections of both theology classes and arranged to visit twenty percent of the overall classes and distribute surveys to those selected. Twenty percent of the classes came to a total of four classes, so the researcher visited two Theology I classes and two Theology II classes.

Study implementation. The researcher was on campus the first two weeks of November 2012. In the initial design of this study it was estimated that each theology class had roughly fifty students. The researcher planned to attend twenty percent of the theology classes offered, so it was estimated the researcher would attend about four theology classes and survey an approximate 200 students.

However, the classes were not as well attended the day the researcher attended, so a total of 135 total students were surveyed. Of the total, six students did not properly complete the survey or the corresponding consent form, so 129 of the surveys were useable. Of the completed surveys, 14% of the participants were Asian, 55% were Caucasian, 12% were Hispanic/Latino, and less than 1% were African American, Egyptian, and Persian. Additionally, 11% of participants supplied more than one ethnic background, and 5% offered no response. Most students were between the ages of 19 to 22, though the age range of the surveys was 19 to 56. Fifty-two men and 77 women completed the survey. Additionally, 47 of the surveyed students were sophomores, 62 were juniors, 18 were seniors, and two students did not note their year in school.

Once the researcher separated the surveys of willing participants, she placed the female surveys and male surveys in separate piles. Then an equal number of male students and female

students were placed into a pile, mixed around, and were randomly selected until an equal ratio of male and female students were acquired.

Initially, the interviewer wanted to meet with 20% of the population from the initial surveys. However, since the Theology classes were not as well attended on the day the researcher visited, 20% of the surveyed population only came to 26 students. The researcher decided to contact a total of forty students, which was the original plan, and was able to meet with a total of 33 students, which came to 25% of the surveyed population. The researcher interviewed 17 male students and 16 female students. Nineteen students were white, three were Asian, two were Hispanic, one was African American, and one was Persian. Finally, six identified more than one ethnic background, and one student did not offer ethnic background information.

Validity, Reliability, and Coding

The study should be considered valid because the survey questions and interview questions directly related to the research questions. Both the survey and the interview questions inquired where students connected to the university community, how that connection has changed since the student's first year on campus, and how relevant the community is to their lives. Additionally, the population surveyed and interviewed supported the study's validity because students were surveyed in a class that, with the exception of students enrolled in the honors program, was a required class. The researcher attended both the Theology I and Theology II classes as there were certain sections of the Theology I classes some students would wait until their final year to take because the professor was popular. The attendance of both sections allowed the researcher an opportunity to reach some of the students who wait until their senior year to take the class thus giving the researcher greater access to the overall student population.

Also, this study should be considered reliable. The first reason for reliability is that all students, those who participated in the interviews and those that did not, completed the same initial Likert survey and received the same instructions on how to complete the survey. Furthermore, during the one-on-one interviews students were given the same directions on how to answer the questions. The interview questions were asked in the same order; these questions were asked in a certain order to assist students in their memory recall so they could compare their current experiences with their experiences their freshmen year. Another reason this study was reliable was during the two weeks of the study, the researcher spoke with students of different ethnicities, social backgrounds, educational backgrounds, and living situations. This was an important factor of reliability because the researcher was able to speak with students with multiple experiences within the community; and common themes became the data used in chapter four. In addition, students were randomly selected. Finally, the researcher interviewed an equal ratio of men to women during the interviews.

The researcher transcribed and printed interviews. To code the interviews, major themes such as: housing, academics, student responsibility were highlighted with a different color. Then the various components were combined and themes will be discussed in chapter four. It was very important that student's privacy be protected in this study. Therefore, subjects were never referred to by name on the transcripts or in the finalized data. The only document that had subjects name on it was the consent form, which was destroyed after the project was completed. Additionally, all transcripts, recordings, and data from this project were destroyed once thesis was filed.

The design of the study was to create a space where the researcher could talk with students one-on-one and listen to their experiences with community. Once the study was

completed in mid November, themes which identified areas of student connection to the university community and where the administration could better support students which will be discussed in chapter four.

Chapter Four: Data Discussion

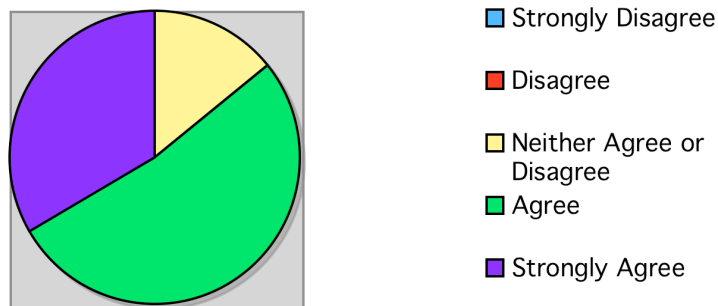
Chapter four will detail the results from the survey as well as the common themes from the interviews.

Initial Survey Results

Before the themes from the one-on-one interviews are discussed at length, the results from the framework survey will be examined. As mentioned above, students were asked to agree with statements regarding the university's community using a Likert scale, scored with a range of one to five. A score of one, indicated students strongly disagreed with the statement; a score of five, indicated students strongly agreed with the statement. If a student chose the number two, they disagreed with the statement, a three showed the student neither agreed nor disagreed, and a score of four pointed that students agreed with the statement. To illustrate the data, a graph for each statement will follow the results discussion. A copy of the survey can be found in the Appendix.

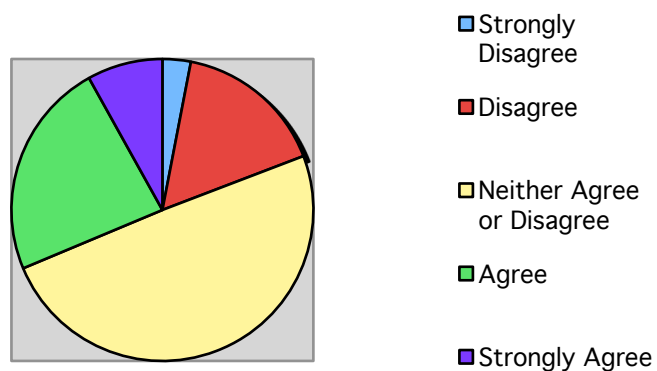
Statement one declared: "[the University] offers me many opportunities to connect to the university community". The total student response was as follows: 1 student (>1%) disagreed, 18 students (14%) neither disagreed or agreed, 67 (52%) agreed with the statement, and 43 (33%) strongly agreed with the statement. On statement one, there were no students who strongly disagreed with the statement.

Statement One

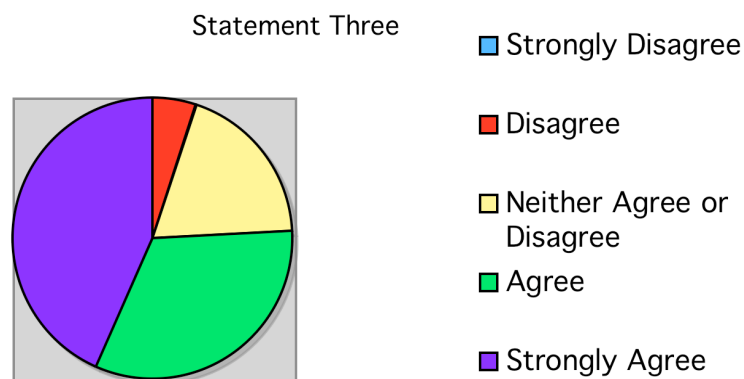


Statement two said: “There are more opportunities for me to connect with [the University]’s community now than in my freshmen year.” The student response was as follows: Four students strongly disagreed (4%), 21 students disagreed (16%), 63 (49%) chose option three and neither agreed or disagreed, 30 students (23%) agreed, and 11 (8%) strongly agreed.

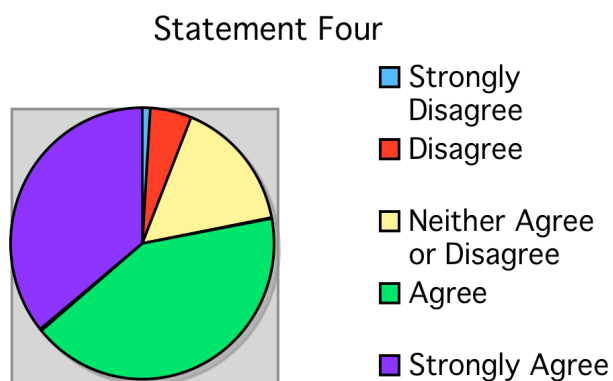
Statement Two



The student response for statement three, or “I have found a place in [the University]’s community where I can be myself” were: No students strongly disagreed, seven students (5%) disagreed, 24 (19%) students neither disagreed or agreed, 42 (32%) agreed, and 56 (43%) strongly agreed with the statement.

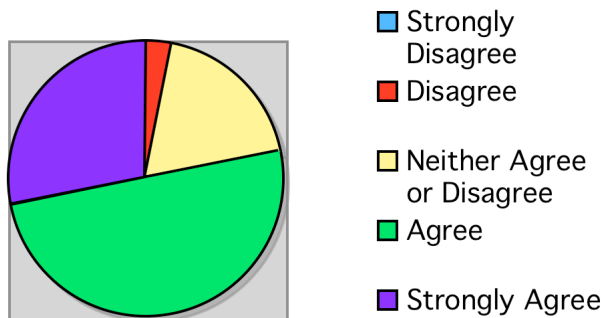


Statement four stated: “When I have a problem, there are people within [The University’s] community that I can go to for guidance and support.” Two (1%) students strongly disagreed, six (5%) disagreed with the statement, 20 (16%) neither disagreed or agreed with the statement, 54 (42%) agreed with the statement, and 47 (36%) agreed with the statement.



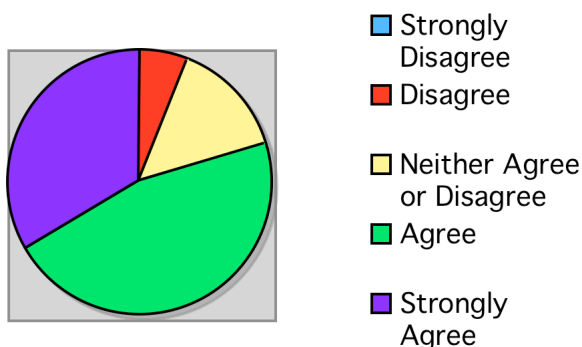
Statement five gauged if students experienced a change to community by stating, “My sense of community has changed since my first year at [The University].” Four (3%) students disagreed, 24 (19%) neither agreed nor disagreed, 65 (50%) agreed, and 36 (28%) strongly agreed with the statement. There were no students who strongly disagreed.

Statement Five



On statement six, “My interactions with community have challenged me to grow both academically and spiritually”, one (>1%) student strongly disagreed, 8 (6%) disagreed, 18 (14%) neither disagreed nor agreed, 59 (46%) agreed, and 43 (33%) strongly agreed.

Statement Six



Statement seven asked students to identify where area that they connected most with the university community. Nine (7%) of overall students chose Clubs/Activities, 27 (21%) chose the dorm life, 54 (42%) chose friends, 13 (10%) chose their academic program, seventeen (13%) students chose various combinations of dorm life, friends, clubs/activities, and their academic program. Finally on this question, one student identified missions, (>1%) one (>1%) chose family, one (>1%) chose ministry, one (>1%) chose the Collegium, one (>1%) chose Associated

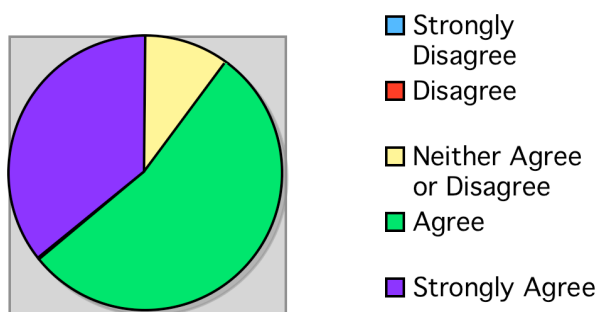
Students (AS), and one (>1%) chose athletics. Three (2%) students chose not to circle or list a response.

Statement Seven



The final question asked students their overall opinion of the university community, “Overall, I would rate [The University]’s community as excellent”. One (>1%) student each either strongly disagreed or disagreed, 13 (10%) neither agreed or disagreed, 69 (53%) agreed, and 45 (35%) strongly agreed.

Statement Eight



Student response to the survey show that students, at this particular university, feel satisfied with their experiences with the university community. Over 80% of students agreed that they have opportunities to connect to the university, can be authentic, and have a place in community. Interestingly, over 50% percent of students surveyed note that their connection to the community has changed since they first arrived on campus.

Themes from Interviews

The information from the survey provided a general understanding of how students perceived connection and support from the university. However, to gain a more in-depth view of student's experiences, themes that appeared in the one-on-one interviews, will be discussed.

Living situation. The majority of interviewed students who lived on campus stated the dorm was where they made friends when they first arrived at the university, and where their friendships developed. This particular university has eight dorms, which range from one hundred students to four hundred students. Although men and women co-inhabit most dorms (but live on separate floors) the university offers one dorm solely for men and one dorm solely for women. The university's Associate Dean of Students stated that this university requires all freshmen and sophomores, who are under the age of 20, to live on campus in the dorms, though students whose families live nearby are able to commute. He noted that on-campus students "tend to make stronger relational connections, just by virtue of proximity and accessibility of resources" (personal communication, November 8, 2012).

Students disclosed they connected to others from their residence halls because they constantly interacted with the same people as they walked into the dorm building, encountered the same faces on their floors, and ran into fellow residents in bathrooms and lobbies. Those students who lived in a larger dorm noted that it could be more difficult to interact with other members of their dorm due to the fact that it was difficult to know who was living on which floor. One student who lived in one of the larger dorms on campus observed, "I knew all the girls on my floor, but I didn't really know the other people in the dorm" (personal communication, November 15, 2012).

Often in the interviews, students reported a greater connection to members on their floor than in their overall hall. Floors generally have an overarching theme or mission that corresponded with their name. One floor, for example, a guy's floor named Mosaic, focused on biblical masculinity, or chivalry. The floor established the idea that members of the floor were like the pieces of a mosaic: Individuals may look different, but each was required to make up a larger picture, which was the floor. One of the students on the floor noted that the fact that the floor was inhabited by "really solid guys—... juniors and seniors and a lot of freshmen" (personal communication, November 9, 2012) helped create a strong foundation. The university's Director of Residence Life, recounted that because the university does not separate students based on their year in school, the residence life community is "more robust" ((personal communication, November 8, 2012).). Additionally, students remarked the time with each other built and maintained relationships. Activities such as hanging out in floor member's rooms, going on late In N Out runs, floor dinners, floor retreats, and various events drew students together.

Additionally, students continuously told how one particular fall event, Nationball, increased their connectedness to the dorm community. Nationball, a campus-wide Dodgeball game, was where individual dorms, the apartments (called the Block), and commuter students played Dodgeball against one another. Each group wore the same color of shirt to distinguish players from each community. One particular student recalled that because his dorm usually entered the competition last, he and his fellow residents put on the colors of other dorms over their dorm color, which was yellow, and walked in with that group. He said:

We went and hid with them, like black for Horton, red for Stewart, you know, pink for Hope, whatever, and then two of our guys....walked in the gym when Sigma's time was

to walk in, looking all awkward....and once they gave us the signal, like them in the middle of the the gym, everyone ripped their shirts off and yellow appeared out of nowhere and we just rushed the middle of the gym (personal communication, November 8, 2102)

Students recalled how that this event was a way for the entire dorm to connect at the beginning of the year and join for a common cause.

While students disclosed that living in the dorms allowed them to build relationships, they acknowledged the individual still had to participate in dorm life to ensure connectedness to the community. For example, when the culture of the floor encouraged students to keep their doors open while students were in their rooms, higher levels of community were reported. One student reminisced about her floor her first year, “I just didn’t know very many people, not very many people reached [out] to each other, everyone’s doors were closed” (personal communication, November, 7, 2012). Similarly, students who lived on floors that were smaller (between 20-30 students) expressed more satisfaction in their community than students who lived on larger floors. The same student stayed in the same hall for her second year, but moved to a smaller floor and shared she was much happier in her community, saying with less residents on the floor, “it’s...easier to build close relationships with people” (personal communication, November, 7, 2012).

Students observed there was very little interaction between dorms. Students shared that they did not often travel to other dorms, nor were there many opportunities to visit others across campus. Those who had been in Resident Assistant (RA) training also noted that while classes were attended by RAs of all dorms, there was little interaction when it came to planning events for residents. Indeed, brother and sisters floors were most often floors in the same dorm.

Another large determination of the level of community to a floor, and subsequently the entire dorm, was how accessible the RA was to floor mates, as well as how the RA team worked together. Students noted the power of intentionality. While students liked the various events that the RAs planned on the floor, such as retreats or GYRADS (Get Your Roommate A Date-a social activity where residents find dates for their roommates), they shared they felt more satisfied in their experience on the floor when the RA built a relationship with the student. One student remarked how the RA her current year planned two really impressive events, both at little outside cost for the student, but floor members still felt disconnected and detached to the RA because she seemed more focused relationships outside the floor. A different student remarked that the community on her floor improved her second year just by the fact that her RA hung out on the floor much more often. Another student remembered how while one of her RAs was in the university honors program she still spent much of her time on the floor relating to the residents. Finally, a student who served as an RA the previous year described how he and his floor partner tried to teach and reinforce the idea that the guys on the floor were family, and that the floor was their home. He noted: "We planned events you know not just because that's part of the job but really to, like, offer ourselves up to those to...the people that needed it" (personal communication, November, 13, 2012)

Students also revealed how important it was in the dorm community for the RA team to get along with each other. During the interviews, students in one dorm raved about how much better the community of the dorm as a whole had improved compared to the previous year. The researcher was able to speak to one of the RAs from that hall, who shared that the nine RAs of that building enjoyed spending time together in the RA duty office, even when they were not assigned duty that night, which helped them as grow close as a team. In contrast, other students

who had lived in another dorm shared how disruptive it was for teams of RAs who strongly disliked each other. One student recalled how the RAs in her dorm “fought all the time and everyone hated each other. And then they’d tell us” (personal communication, November, 7, 2012). Another student remembered the RAs who worked in his dorm the previous year got along, though they didn’t act like a team. He compared the previous year’s team to the current year where the RAs are “a team, they are there for each other...they’ve got each other’s backs” (personal communication, November, 8, 2012).

Overall, students recognized that the position of the RA was very difficult because the role of the RA was to shepherd and support the floor, and they recounted that their experience on the floor was greatly impacted by how intentional the RAs were in focusing on relationships on the floor.

On campus housing community vs. commuter community. Because students who live in the dorms have better access to one another, they shared a greater sense of community than students who were commuters. The university’s commuter students came from one of two groups. The first group was comprised of students who commuted to campus since their first year, as their families lived close to the campus. The second group, were students who lived on campus for at least one year, and then moved back home or moved into an apartment with other students. The Director of Commuter Life, stated that 38% of the overall undergraduate population were commuter students, and noted that 97% of students, who responded a 2004 survey, identified themselves as those who began their first year as a commuter student (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

Students who previously lived on campus before they decided to commute shared they still found connection with friends who lived on campus. Several reported they hung out in their

old halls when they had free time on campus. Many commuter students explained that while they often hung out with friends on campus, eating meals on campus could pose a challenge. Many shared mealtime was an ideal break in the day to reconnect with friends, but as commuter students generally did not have a meal plan, it could be difficult eat with their on-campus friends, who ate in the cafeteria. Other commuter students admitted they struggled with finding a place on campus to hang out in since they did not have access to a dorm room.

The Director of Commuter Life shared that one way the university administration tried to assist commuter students was to build a facility, called the Collegium, which provided students a place to stay and hang out with fellow commuters in between classes. The program also provided students opportunities to connect with other commuter students through events. In the past, these events have included: A murder mystery event, a food themed event- a salsa bar, a peanut butter and jelly bar, etc. The Collegium also hosted events where non-Collegium members were invited to attend. For example, they hosted an event, Storytime, where one of the university's administrators came to read children's stories to students. At the most recent Storytime, the university provost read one story about the beheading of Marie Antoinette, and one which featured the cartoon characters Phineas and Ferb.

The facility has limited space, and there is a limit to how many students can be members in a semester. The Director of Commuter Life noted that while the facility was originally built for 250 students, the Collegium is currently capped at 170 students. It seemed that as members developed relationships with other members, they would spend longer intervals in the facility, thus filling the center faster.

None of the students who participated in the one-on-one interviews were active Collegium members, though one student had been a member of the Collegium her first year on

campus. When asked why they were not participants in the Collegium, many students shared the membership fees were a deterrent. One student recalled he and his friends already felt bitter about having to pay the parking permit (which is required for anyone with a car) and strongly disliked the idea of having to pay an additional amount to hang out in the space designated for other commuters. As one student said, “a place like the Collegium is a good idea, but if they [the university] could provide a bigger or free [facility], or anything like that, where students are more accessible without it having to cost, it would be better” (personal communication, November 9, 2012).

The Collegium is not the only avenue for commuter students on campus to feel connected to the university. Students described how every week they received an email, which featured campus events for that particular week. Students shared that this email helped them stay better informed than their friends who live on campus because they could pull up event information on their phones. While students shared the email was very helpful, they admitted they did not often attend the events. Many events occurred after students finished classes, and were already home. It could also be a challenge to attend the event as commuter students shared when they attended events, they didn’t know other students who went, and felt disconnected.

Thus, students shared that they felt more connected to the community when they lived on campus. This can be attributed to the fact that respondents were living close to other students and were able to hang out with students during their free time. Additionally, the RAs have an impactful role on the floor as students shared they felt a stronger connection to the floor when their RA made an intentional effort to spend time with them. Conversely, commuter students struggled to connect with other students. While programs such as the Collegium helped, students were less likely to be members of the facility as they progress through their years that the

university. Additionally, commuter students related they were well informed of on-campus events, but still struggled to attend these events because they knew few people who attended.

Friendship. During the interviews, students also shared their connection to the community was impacted by the friendships they made with other students. Many shared their freshmen year, or first year on campus, was filled with meeting new people and making new friendships. After the first year, many discovered that their relationships would either deepen or would fade away. The Director of Residence Life confirmed that friendship is a major theme in the middle years of schooling, especially in the second year. She noted that when students discover their relationships didn't last, "you feel more lonely and isolated and don't feel connected to the greater university" (personal communication, November 7, 2012). The Director of Academic Advising and Student Retention, verified that based on research the university had completed on the sophomore year, "Sophomore students maybe feel like they've made mistakes in the friendships or the relationships of the community they found themselves in the freshmen year, and there's not really a natural place to re-define or re-establish different community once you've already kind of set your feet in a particular world" (personal communication, November, 15, 2012). As students shared about their experiences, many mentioned that by the time they reach their middle years in school, they are still open to new relationships, but tend to focus on deepening the relationships they have already formed. One student said, "as fun as that is [meeting new people]...it's just sometimes that's not as satisfying as knowing a few people on a deeper level" (personal communication, November, 13, 2012).

Furthermore, there seemed to be a correlation with students who shared a very connected and open floor to strong friendships that deepened over time. Whereas, students who lived on floors their first year that had difficulty connecting to each other shared they had fewer

friendships until they were able to join a more open community. One student, who lived on campus, shared that she struggled to find community within her dorm, but then was able to make friends with some of the guys who lived in another dorm across campus. After these friendships developed, she remarked that she would spend all her free time hanging out in the lobby with her guy friends and would usually only return to her dorm to sleep. Eventually she was able to move out of her dorm and to a new dorm that was friendly. Other students remarked that their friend circles have consolidated with other circles especially as students move into different dorms and meet new people.

It is important to note that many commuter students who began their first year as a commuter student shared they made many of their friend connections in their classes. One student stated, 'I found community through the friends that I had class with' (personal communication, November 13, 2012). The same student confessed that he and his friends were on opposite schedules in the semester the interviews took place, and was subsequently feeling less connected to community. Another student recounted that his goal for the semester was to make friends with five new people in his classes, which was difficult because many students in his major classes did not hang out together much outside of class.

Campus events. Beyond where students lived and the friendships that they made, students also discussed how connection to the university community could be strengthened through campus events, specifically: Clubs, intramural sports, and ministries. From the interviews, many students shared they connected to ministries, such as, Skid Row, where students worked with the Los Angeles homeless population and a mentoring program that connected students to nearby high schools. Other students shared how they were apart of clubs that allowed them to meet students outside the dorm communities, which they felt was helpful to

their development. Additionally, intramural activities allowed students to connect with others who shared their same interest in various athletic activities.

This university also offered events on campus, such as debates, social events, campus traditions, concerts, and chapels, which students remarked on. Respondants had mixed feelings on the effectiveness of these events. Many students said that when they had a group to go with, these events were enjoyable as long as the event was something they were interested in. However, it was more challenging to attend these events alone, and it was often difficult to meet new acquaintances during these events because they were usually attended in groups of friends. Students generally agreed that the two conferences, Torrey and Missions Conference, which respectively are offered in the fall and spring, bring the campus together.

However students admitted that many of the events featured on campus were usually not something they were interested in, and therefore often did not attend. One such example was when the band Reliant K performed on campus. When asked if they attended, many students shared that they had little background knowledge of the band or had little interest to attend. Additionally, students believed many of the social events offered on campus were not very relevant. One student expressed frustration that a few of the events she attended seemed gimmicky, and stated “the events [were] just childish” (personal communication, November 8, 2012). In addition, other students vented that the university did not push athletic games, and there was little school spirit on campus. One athlete declared the only event that focused on athletics was called Midnight Madness, and focused on the basketball team. Most of the time attendance to athletic events was low.

As mentioned above in the housing subsection, students shared the event Nationball was a huge attraction in the fall semester, but some students stated that there was not a similar event

for the spring semester. The Associated Students does organize a variety show that features student talent, called MockRock, but unless students are participants the event is very passive. One student suggested that a campus-wide capture the flag game would be a natural fit for student involvement. The student further suggested that classes, rather than dorms, compete against each other to encourage further campus connectedness.

Academics. Student's sense of their academic community depended on their academic program. One factor for connection to a major was how interactive their classes were. Students reported that they felt less connected in classes that were composed of a lecture format than classes that encouraged discussion and small group work. Some students recalled that the classes they felt connected in were the ones where at the beginning of the semester, the professor had students introduce themselves. Finally, other students recognized how important it was for their professors to spend class time to open the floor for prayer requests. One female theatre student in particular, shared that her favorite part of her classes was during the beginning, when students asked each other for prayer. She noted, "I wouldn't trade even the directors, even though they sometimes infuriate me, because even at the high school any director that I've ever had has never cared about me the way they do" (personal communication, November 8, 2012). Based on conversations with students there seemed to be a correlation between class size and connectedness to the university community; students reported that they felt more connected to certain classes when they were smaller.

Certain majors, by nature of the academic program, helped students feel more connected than others. Communication Studies and Disorders, for example, encouraged students to begin to build a network with classmates and to stay in touch after graduation to assist students in staying up-to-date on new developments in their field. Other programs, such as Christian

Ministry, encouraged faculty to be as available to students as possible, and students noted that their professors would attend the yearly retreat organized by the program. Also, faculty members often advised students they were open to meeting with those who would like to set up an one-on-one meeting to offer the student support. Another student who switched majors noted that in her new major she already knew so many more people than in her old major.

On the other hand, some students noted their major professors had no idea what was going on with their lives. One student, an RA, remarked how she wished her professors would remember her duties as an RA, and occasionally inquire how she was doing. Other students described that it was difficult to feel connected currently to their major, but hoped that as they began to take more upper division classes in the future, they would feel more connected to their academic program.

Responsibility. One final theme that came out of the interviews was student responsibility. Many students acknowledged that in order to feel connected to the university community, students had to take some initiative. They shared that those who wanted to be involved with the community would find areas where they could become connected. One student remarked: “I don’t think we’re entitled to just automatically have good community, you have to work for it” (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

The theme of responsibility also came up in conversation in context of leadership roles. The students who had been or were currently in leadership roles such as a SOS (first year orientation) leader, RA, or other leadership roles noted that the responsibility that was apart of their leadership position increased their connection to the university. One reason for this was that students had class or regular events with other leaders in the same program, which allowed

them to make new friends. One student said, “as a student ambassador...aided me in getting connected and just having 30 friends” (personal communication, November 13, 2012).

Furthermore, a different student leader shared how her new leadership role came with more responsibility, which gave her the freedom to be an example to other students. She recalled that being an RA “pushed me to be able to talk to people and do things that I wouldn’t have done when I wasn’t an RA cause I didn’t feel...I guess the confidence or like I had a reason to” (personal communication, November 16, 2012). Another student who was a dorm representative in the student government shared how his leadership position helped him connect to the dorm environment because it was his job to connect with everyone in his dorm. He shared how it would be difficult to connect with everyone without his leadership role, because his schedule was so busy.

Thus, the themes from the one-on-one interviews were: Housing, commuting, friendship, campus events, and responsibility. It can be concluded that students overall felt a strong sense of community to the university especially in their dorms and their friendships. The final chapter of this thesis will synthesize the information provided in the first four chapters and will examine the research questions based on the data presented in chapter four.

Chapter Five: A Final Evaluation

The goal of the Christian university is to provide students a community where students learn to think about their faith, develop Christ-like character, and build strong academic skills. The data presented in chapter four revealed that while the community where the study was completed is not perfect, most students were able to find a niche to connect to somewhere in the university community. This final chapter will review what was covered in the first four chapters

and then will use the data provided in chapter four to answer the research questions posed in chapter one.

First, chapter one discussed how one's experience at the university changed as the student transitioned into their middle years in school. The chapter informed the reader how the university has evolved in the last hundred years and become an environment where new ideas, cultures, and independence are introduced to the student.

Then, chapter two discussed previous literature on connection to the university community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) introduced the concept that one's sense of community is comprised of membership, influence, shared values, and a shared emotional connection. One's sense of community is strengthened when they feel they belong to the group and when group members care for one another. The sense of community was applied to the university setting where it was discovered that participation in campus activities could increase connectedness to the community. Chapter two also connected how one's sense of community to Tinto's (2012)'s work on retention, and discussed students who feel supported by the university community had higher retention rates than those who struggled with finding support and purpose on campus. The literature also revealed that sophomores struggle due an increased difficulty level in their academic work. Finally, Graunke and Woosley (2005) noted there was a positive correlation between sophomores who had a strong sense of professional goals and the student's GPA.

Next, the study's methodology was discussed at length in chapter three. The researcher distributed a survey and interviewed students at a small to mid-sized Christian university located in Southern California. The survey provided a framework to see how connected students were to the university community. From the surveyed population, volunteer students were randomly

selected to participate in a brief one-on-one interview. During the interviews, students were asked to share how their connection to the university had changed since their first year and areas where the community could be improved.

Finally, the data was presented in chapter four. From the surveys, over 80% of students agreed they felt connected to the university and were able to share their authentic self with others. Students also noted their connection to the community had changed since their first year.

The themes from the one-on-one interviews were more revealing as students shared they felt the most connected to the community when they lived in the dorms and specifically lived on a floor that emphasized community between floor mates. It was also evident that the RA strongly influenced the tone of community on the floor. RAs who were intentional in building community were very appreciated by the students on the floor. Commuter students also shared how difficult it was to connect to community when one did not live on campus, as they sometimes struggled to find a place to stay during down times on campus and build relationships with fellow students.

The data also revealed that students felt events offered on campus were not relevant to their life experiences. In addition, friendships became an especially important factor of connection to the community. Events were often attended by groups of friends, and students shared how over time, their friend groups would either consolidate and deepen or diminish. Students also shared how each student had a responsibility to invest in the university's community, and students had a responsibility to seek out community.

Overall, the data provided both in the surveys and the interviews indicated most students felt connected to the university community. Next, the information provided from the data in chapter four will answer the research questions from chapter one.

Research Questions:

1. What are the areas that sophomores and juniors feel connected to their college community?

Based on the initial surveys and one-on-one interviews, it can be concluded that students who are in their sophomore and junior years and live on campus find their connection through their dorm communities. Students who commute reported a smaller connection to the campus community though they do have the option to become a member in the Collegium. Additionally, participation in events, such as a club or a ministry, could help students cement a connection the university as they provided new opportunities for students to meet each other. Finally, as students moved towards major specific classes, they reported stronger connection to their academic program.

2. After their first year in community did students notice a change to their connection to the university community?

One change that students noted was a change to their friend groups. Students disclosed how the friends, which developed their first year, would either deepen or would fade away. Others commented that while their group of friends still remained the same, they did not have the same amount of time to spend with them as in previous years or semesters.

Another change students shared was as they transitioned from their freshmen year to their sophomore and junior years, they began to take a more intentional role on their floor. One student commented that when he was a freshman, he benefited from the older students on the floor pouring into him, which made him feel welcome and a valued member of the floor. As he moved to his junior year he stated that the roles were reversed. He began to pour into the others on his floor. He said, "I'm the one going to the new guys' floor, er rooms to them, initiating. So

instead of the responder, I'm now the initiator with a lot of the community" (personal communication, November 9, 2012).

Some students believed felt more comfortable with the university community in their second and third years. Students spoke about the commonality they felt with the knowledge that faculty and other students shared the same faith as they did.

Another trend students shared was how their initial expectations of the campus community had to be adjusted. One student remarked that she had to realize that deep friendships would take years to develop: "You can't expect to have those really good relationships immediately. Like it takes years and years. And I had to realize that" (personal communication, November 9, 2012). Another spoke about how some people become disillusioned that they feel alone or do not get along with others at a Christian university and have to realize that the people on campus "come here to become more wholesome people, but they come here broken just like anyone else. And we're not perfect and real people hurt one another" (personal communication, November 16, 2012).

The Associate Dean of Students remarked one of the changes in the transitional years of sophomores and juniors was spiritual growth. One of the by-products of this growth is a "stretching experience of being challenged to take a good look at what I believe, in terms of my faith and who I am as a person. And I am my family, but I'm not my family" (personal communication, November 8, 2012). As a result, students often work through an understanding of their identity, and insight of who they are as a person.

3. Do students feel the support being offered from the university's administration is relevant to their life experiences?

Overall, both the surveys and the one-on-one interviews showed that students felt the community at the university was relevant to their life experiences. Students recognized that the administration has a difficult job, as there are many students to relate to on campus. From the surveys and interviews, students generally concluded the infrastructure of the university was very supportive to the growth of community. However, there were a few areas within the community student's felt could be improved.

The first area was students would like to see an increased discussion between students and administrators regarding on-campus rules. Some student's believed the rules associated with living on campus were too restrictive. For example, students mentioned the Open House hours, which allow men on women's floors and women on men's floors during certain hours in the week, were too few and unnecessary. Students seemed to struggle with feeling some of the rules that were associated with living in the dorms prevented them from making decisions as adults. On the other hand, a member of the Student Care Team, noted that one of the goals of the residence life program was to teach students how to be a good neighbor, and mentioned that while some students felt the rules were too restrictive, others might appreciate the boundary. He pointed out that if a student does not learn how to be considerate of the others around them, they could struggle when they leave the campus. He stated: "You need to be considerate of the people around that are in your space, in your world, essentially" (personal communication, November 8, 2012).

Another student mentioned that the university is too close-minded when it came to the issue of alcohol. Upon entry to the university, students sign a statement that affirms they will not drink alcohol even after turning the age of 21. The student noted, however, that students do drink after they turn 21 and may want to participate in a discussion with others about drinking.

However, there is an impression that if they were honest their RA would have to report them. He noted one “never feel[s] comfortable bringing these issues to light and talk to other people about it” (personal communication, November 8, 2012).

Another segment of community students believed could be improved was the issue of diversity. Students observed one of the tendencies of the student body was for students to form groups in their own ethnic circles. One female student described, “you see Asian people only hanging out with Asians and you only see Caucasian people hanging out with Caucasian people, and everybody else” (personal communication, November 9, 2012). She went on to remark that the community would be so much better if students could “connect with people there were different” (personal communication, November 9, 2012). Another student shared his opinion that it can be more comfortable to stay within one’s culture, and “there’s a sense, maybe from both sides, to not want to make the extra step to reach out...to where it just feels awkward for both” (personal communication, November 16, 2012). He noted that while the university hosts a conference to discuss diversity issues, many of the students in the campus community especially those in the majority carry the belief, “if they didn’t make it an issue, it wouldn’t be an issue” (personal communication, November 16, 2012).

One suggestion to increase diversity on campus was to incorporate more diversity in worship during chapels. One student confirmed that while the university does include some different worship styles, like the Gospel Choir and certain worship leaders, the majority of the music that is played is “white evangelical worship” (personal communication, November 15, 2012). She suggested the chapels incorporate an even more diverse selection of worship styles saying: “Everyone should be represented because everyone will be represented in Heaven, why are we not representing them here on earth?” (personal communication, November 15, 2012).

Another suggestion to encourage diversity on campus was to highlight the celebrations of various cultures. One student declared, “*Everyone* has parties. Everyone has laughter, and everyone smiles in the same language. Um, and if you can bring that sort of fun aspect of everyone’s culture... I think it would be really good” (personal communication, November 9, 2012). He proposed the university community participate in a global celebration every month or every semester.

The final area students mentioned where improvements could be made was to offer a mentor program so students would have access to guidance. One student acknowledged that the Spiritual Discipline Department offered a spiritual mentor, but she felt it would be beneficial if the university connected with some of the local alumni that could provide students a resource for someone to talk to about life. She recalled, “I think there’s a lot of people who don’t have....anyone..older to reach out” (personal communication, November 7, 2012). Another student professed that while friends can provide some direction and a support system, there is still a sense that “your friends are in the same spot, and sometimes if [they] haven’t [been] through things that you really need help with” (personal communication, November 16, 2012). He observed the experience and wisdom of someone with a longer life could be a big asset to student growth. One report from the university alumni magazine, that came out shortly after the study was completed, featured discussion of a new program being developed for alumni to mentor new graduates. One idea could be the to extend the program to allow current students to participate in mentoring from alumni (Bee, 2013). The university could connect students with alumni based on professional goals in order to support students as they develop into adulthood and to help them build contacts in their intended field.

Therefore, the study presented in this thesis demonstrated students who were interviewed identified their connection to their university through the dorm program and friendships. Students believed the campus community could be improved by featuring events that actively involved the entire community and offered less gimmicks. Also, students felt activities that engaged in a more intimate environment, and encouraged students to break away from their comfort zones would be beneficial. The literature indicated that students who feel connected in some way to the university were more likely upon graduation to leave the university with the confidence to approach their professional goals. Community within the university setting is important because when students find a place where they can develop and build strong relationships with one another, the student carries these relationships with them for the majority of their lives.

Public Policy:

Because community helps support the student during their years at the university, universities should develop and fund infrastructure that promotes community. The structure should be an area where students can form group identities with other students, but should also be open enough where these groups interact with the rest of the community. The community structure should also be open enough to allow students to express themselves as they discover who they are and allow them opportunities to lead the university community. One example could include a small group community that allow students to build new relationships, but could also provide students leadership opportunities. This would be especially helpful to students whose friendships did not last past the student's first year.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the sample size. While the interview subjects were a good sample of the theology classes visited, it is still small overall. Additionally there were no

students in the theology classes that were members of the university honor's program, so the study missed an opportunity to gain their perspective. It would be difficult to directly apply every conclusion from this study to other universities. However, the overall themes, such as housing, friendship, and responsibility would be very applicable to other university communities where the majority of the freshmen and sophomore students live on campus and share a common faith.

Recommendations for Further Study

One recommendation for further study would be to repeat the qualitative study, but to incorporate a longitudinal aspect into the interviews. If students meet with the same researcher over a period of a year or two, they would become more comfortable with the researcher and therefore more likely to share vulnerability. Additionally, the researcher would be able to see how transitioning from year to year, and to an off campus community would impact students connection to the university community. The study could also follow students to see if university connection helps students succeed in their professions. New research questions could be: How does connection to the community support students as they build their carriers?

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Appendix

Initial Survey Distributed to Students in Theology I and Theology Classes

Major: _____ Year in School: _____
 On/Off Campus: _____ Years Attending: _____
 Year of Birth: _____ Gender: _____ Ethnicity: _____

Using the scale below, please circle the number that best represents your experiences with
 [university name removed]'s university community.

1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neither Agree or Disagree
 4= Agree 5= Strongly Agree

1. [The university] offers me many opportunities to connect to the university community.
 1 2 3 4 5
2. There are more opportunities for me to connect with [The university]'s community now than in my first year.
 1 2 3 4 5
3. I have found a place in [The university]'s community where I can be myself.
 1 2 3 4 5
4. When I have a problem, there are people within the [The university] community that I can go to for guidance and support.
 1 2 3 4 5
5. My sense of community has changed since my first year at [The university].
 1 2 3 4 5
6. My interactions with community have challenged me to grow both academically and spiritually.
 1 2 3 4 5
7. I feel most connected to Biola's community through: (circle best response)
 Dorm Life Friends Major Missions Clubs/Activities Other: _____
8. Overall, I would rate [The university]'s community as excellent.
 1 2 3 4 5

Please circle one:

YES NO I would be willing to be further interviewed regarding my
 experiences with community at [University Name Removed]
University.

If Yes please fill below:

Name: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone Number: _____